

## STUDIES IN PSALMS

### PSALM 34

#### DESCRIPTIVE TITLE

An Alphabetical Psalm of Praise and Instruction.

#### ANALYSIS

For convenience, this psalm may be regarded as resolving itself into three stanzas of seven verses each, followed by a *Refrain*. Its chief contents are: Resolve to Praise, Invitation to Join, and a Manifesto of Principles to be Discovered in Jehovah's Government. Its principal Literary features are: its Alphabetical structure, with the Waw-stanza Absent, as if to make way for a Redemption-*Refrain* without exceeding Twenty-two verses. It responds, with its Predominant Praise, to Psalm 25 with its Burden of Prayer. For its probably Romantic Origin, see "Exposition."

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(Lm.)—By David—When he disguised his sanity before Abimelek;  
and he drove him away, and he departed.

- 1 Let me bless Jehovah at all times—  
continually be his praise in my mouth.
- 2 In Jehovah shall my soul boast—  
let the humble make it heard and be glad.
- 3 Ascribe ye greatness to Jehovah with me—  
and let us exalt his name together.
- 4 I sought after Jehovah and he answered me—  
and out of my terrors he rescued me.
- 5 They looked intently unto him and beamed—  
and their faces were not abashed.
- 6 This humbled one cried and Jehovah heard—  
and out of all his distresses saved him.
- 7 The messenger of Jehovah encamped  
around those revering him and rescued them.
- 8 Taste and see that good is Jehovah—  
how happy the man taking refuge in him.
- 9 Revere Jehovah ye his holy ones—  
for there is no lack to them who revere him.
- 10 Young lions have wanted and hungered—  
but they who seek after Jehovah lack not any good thing.

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- 11 O come sons and hearken unto me—  
the reverence of Jehovah will I teach you.
- 12 Who is the man that taketh pleasure in life—  
loving days that he may see good?
- 13 Keep thy tongue from evil—  
and thy lips from speaking deceit:
- 14 Depart from evil and do good—  
aim at peace and pursue it.
- 16 The face of Jehovah is against the doers of evil—  
to cut off from the earth their remembrance.<sup>1</sup>
- 15 The eyes of Jehovah are towards the righteous—  
and his ears towards their cry for help.
- 17 They made outcry and Jehovah heard—  
and out of all their distresses delivered them.  
and the crushed in spirit he saveth.
- 19 Many are the misfortunes of the righteous—  
but out of them all Jehovah rescueth him.
- 20 He keepeth all his bones—  
not one from among them is broken.
- 21 Misfortune will slay the lawless one—  
and the haters of the righteous one shall be held guilty.
- 22 Jehovah ransometh the life<sup>2</sup> of his servants,  
and none shall be held guilty who take refuge in him.

(Nm.)

## PARAPHRASE

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I will praise the Lord no matter what happens. I will constantly speak of His glories and grace.<sup>3</sup>

2 I will boast of all His kindness to me. Let all who are discouraged take heart!

3 Let us praise the Lord together, and exalt His name.

1. That the -stanza originally stood before the -stanza, is deemed probable by Delitzsch; and is sustained by reference to Lam. 2:16, 17, 3:46-48, 49-51, 4:16, 17. Transposing vers. 15 and 16, accordingly, as above, causes the matter to run on consecutively, and makes it needless to *supply* the words "the righteous" in ver. 17, as is done in A.V., R.V. and Sep. The further effect of this transposition is to produce an Introverted Stanza, which devotes its first and last verses to the wicked, and all the intermediate verses to the righteous.

2. U.: "soul."

3. Literally, "His praise shall continually be in my mouth."

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4 For I cried to Him and He answered me! He freed me from all my fears.

5 Others too were radiant at what He did for them. Theirs was no downcast look of rejection!

6 This poor man cried to the Lord—and the Lord heard him and saved him out of his troubles.

7 For the Angel of the Lord guards and rescues all who reverence Him.

8 Oh, put God to the test and see how kind He is! See for yourself the way His mercies shower down on all who trust in Him!

9 If you belong to the Lord, reverence Him; for everyone who does this has everything he needs.

10 Even strong young lions sometimes go hungry, but those of us who reverence the Lord will never lack any good thing.

11 Sons and daughters, come and listen and let me teach you the importance of trusting and fearing the Lord.

12 Do you want a long, good life?

13 Then watch your tongue! Keep your lips from lying.

14 Turn from all known sin and spend your time in doing good. Try to live in peace with everyone; work hard at it.

15 For the eyes of the Lord are intently watching all who live good lives, and He gives attention when they cry to Him.

16 But the Lord has made up His mind to wipe out even the memory of evil men from the earth.

17 Yes, the Lord hears the good man when he calls to Him for help, and saves him out of all his troubles.

18 The Lord is close to those whose hearts are breaking; He rescues those who are humbly sorry for their sins.

19 The good man does not escape all troubles—he has them too. But the Lord helps him in each and every one.

20 God even protects him from accidents.

21 Calamity will surely overtake the wicked; heavy penalties are meted out to those who hate the good.

22 But as for those who serve the Lord, He will redeem them; everyone who takes refuge in Him will be freely pardoned.

## EXPOSITION

The *occasion* of this psalm, as stated in the ancient headlines, is sufficiently extraordinary to appear romantic, if not incredible. There is no need, however, to make the occasion

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psychologically impossible, by overlooking the precise terms of the superscription; and assuredly the *prima-facie* evidence strongly suggests that such an account of the origin of the psalm could not easily have been placed where it is, had it been a mere afterthought. It would obviously be mere wanton oversight to suggest that David was disguising his sanity at the Court of King Achish (or Abimelek) and composing an acrostic at one and the same time. The legend distinctly enough points to David's *departure* from Gath; and suggests the question—Whither went he when he so departed? Learning as we do (from 1 Sam. 22) that it was to the cave of Adullam, probably less of an incommensurable hole in the rocks than a subterranean palace, large enough for multitudes to hide in, and comfortable enough to afford accommodation for David's father and mother,—as we think of all this,—incredulity begins to retire, and an almost fascinating romance steps into its place. All sorts of realistic questions come to our aid. Did not David, in all probability, reach the cave of Adullam nearly alone? Ere yet comrades gathered to him, how spent he his time? What sort of man was he? Was he not devout? Was he not a poet and a musician? In his fleeing from place to place, did he never contrive to have his harp near him? A worshipper—a poet—a harpist—yea, and possessing an oriental memory, with genius enough in him to contrive those acrostics to aid it,—how far yet are we from the atmosphere of the credible? And then, supposing he had with him no writing-skins, were there no rock surfaces available for such a record? It is true, these are mere tentative questions; but at any rate they are ventilated in the interests of an indubitably ancient inscription: which inscription, be it said, was no more probable invention, than it was of easy insertion, when once the psalm had been continuously and closely written on tablet or parchment, and safely deposited in David's palace library! Books were not then printed in thousands and scattered broadcast, that their readings should be tampered with by every scribe, and wild fancies gain admission and insertion by the royal librarian!

Turning now to the *structure* of this psalm, the two things which claim our attention are: first, that it is alphabetical or an abecedarian acrostic; and, second, that the letter *waw* is wanting, raising the enquiry—*Why?* As to the mere fact that it is alphabetical, there is this to add to a former suggestion, that such an arrangement may, under conceivable circumstances, have

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been due as much to the exigencies of the composer, as to his desire to help the memory of his readers (or hearers, when books were few). Not only were books few for readers; but occasionally papyrus or skins were scarce for authors. The absence of *waw* from the alphabetical arrangement, points to the suppression of a stanza, not for the purpose of reducing the lines to 21 (or 3 times 7) as Briggs suggests, but rather to make way for the additional REDEMPTION stanza at the end, without exceeding the number 22.

As to the *sentiments* of this psalm, they are in any case remarkable, and that for several reasons. The quiet, didactic character of the psalm, naturally springs from its artificial structure. That it should reveal clear kinship with what is now frequently called Wisdom Literature, is not to be denied, but by no means betokens a late date for that reason. Before conceding that, it would be well to inquire from whom the Wisdom Literature first sprang; and the opinion may again be hazarded, as when we first observed a strain of this is Ps. 18, that probably it should be traced back to the prophet Samuel, as familiarised by him in his school for the sons of the prophets. If so, even apart from especial Divine illumination, we need feel no surprise at the occasional appearance of such sententious moralising in David's own psalms as we find here. When we next observe the air of lofty faith and calm joy which pervades this psalm, we begin to feel that we are treading upon holy ground. David had godly parents. His youth, spent in keeping his father's sheep, was given to devout meditation. He had come into contact with Samuel, whom doubtless he regarded with great veneration. Besides all which, since the holy oil of anointing had been poured on his head, he had known the mighty inworking of the Spirit of Jehovah. He had a great destiny in store for him, and he knew it; and however long he might have to wait for its realisation, he knew that those noble heights would ultimately be attained. All these were formative influences of no common order; and, therefore, while we admire the lofty devotion of this psalm, we refrain from incredulous wonder; and it no longer seems impossible to the elasticity of David's devout—as yet unspoiled—young manhood, and after several hairbreadth escapes, he should find the very cave of Adullam converted into a temple, as its spacious vaults echoed to his well-handled harp. We have not forgotten the motley crew that gathered about him in this romantic glen, nor do we doubt that it numbered some ne'er-do-

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wells; but, on the other hand, we may well surmise, that it included some of the finest spirits in Israel. Under such conditions, this restrained acrostic psalm almost palpitates with the life and fire of an oration. We catch the singer's glance around as he exclaims—*Ascribe ye greatness to Jehovah with me, and let us exalt his name together.* Having made his own personal contribution to holy memories by saying—*I inquired of Jehovah, and he answered me,* he notes a group of witnesses to Divine faithfulness, and sings of them—*They looked unto him and beamed, and their faces were not abashed;* when, observing one signal trophy of Jehovah's faithfulness, standing or reclining near him, he subdues his voice to say—*This humbled one cried, and Jehovah heard, and out of all his distresses saved him.* And so forth: calling to a group of doubters—*O taste and see!* then to group of listless young men—*O come, sons, and hearken unto me!* tendering them some excellent advice. But he must needs nerve his comrades to enter boldly into the strife between sin and righteousness, and so rises to that trumpet-like stanza with which the psalm concludes. Happy was Hezekiah to have such a literary treasure in the Royal Library, to pair off with the 25th: adding to that the note of Redemption as an imperial need, and to this the answering note of Redemption in realisation.

### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. To read this psalm is to think that the psalmist is busy counting his blessings—name five blessings here listed. Show how they relate to life today.
2. So often we read the phrase “praise the Lord”—just what is involved in this practice?
3. Isn't it selfish to boast in the Lord because of what He has done for us?
4. There is a difference in being saved “out of your troubles” and being saved “from” your troubles—Discuss.
5. Verses nine and ten are surely unqualified in their promises—or are they?
6. Discuss the formula for a long life. Cf. vs. 12.
7. The “good man” of vs. 17 f.f. must be someone who does not sin—it is this the meaning? Discuss.
8. The Lord takes an intimate interest in the lives of His children—is this always known only in retrospect?